

FROM SURGICAL MASKS TO FURNACE FILTERS

The 3M company has adapted surgical face-mask technology to develop a home furnace filter that it says eliminates up to 97% of the mould, pet dander and pollen that circulates in homes. Nonwoven fibre research led to the development of a pleated, electrostatic micro-particle air filter that has a texture similar to a surgical mask. Concern about household air quality has been growing; a Health Canada immunologist says allergy will be the disease of the 21st century. "Whether it is pollen, mould, insects, animals, house dust mites," said Dr. Hari Vijay, "allergy is on the rise and is creating a lot of problems." The filters are now selling in hardware and home-improvement stores.

HMO ENROLMENT ON THE RISE

Enrolment in US health maintenance organizations (HMOs) has surpassed 50 million patients and is expected to reach 56 million by the end of 1995, according to the Group Health Association of America. HMO enrolment has nearly doubled since 1986, *American Medical News* reported recently.

Reasonable costs are a big reason for the growth. The average HMO member will pay lower premiums in 1995 than last year; premiums for single coverage are expected to decrease an average of 0.9%, to about \$145 per month, while the cost of

family coverage is expected to decline 1.7%, to an average of \$392 monthly. About 85% of HMOs surveyed expected to break even or have surpluses in 1994, and 70% expected their financial performance in 1994 would improve over the previous year. Growth areas for HMOs include the treatment of Medicare and Medicaid patients, and point-of-service plans that allow members to use physicians outside the plan, but at a higher cost. The growth in HMO membership is considered one sign of a move away from fee-for-service medicine in the US.

NO LINK BETWEEN MURDERS AND ANTIDEPRESSANT: JURY

A Louisville, Kentucky, jury has found no link between the world's top-selling antidepressant drug and the actions of Joseph Wesbecker, a Louisville man who in 1989 killed 8 people and wounded 13 others at a printing plant where he used to work. He then committed suicide. Attorneys for some of the survivors and family members of the deceased victims had contended that Prozac was responsible for Wesbecker's actions.

Randall Tobias, chairman and chief executive officer of Eli Lilly and Company, the developer of Prozac, said the verdict reaffirms the drug's safety and efficacy and demonstrates the futility of blaming medications for harmful and criminal acts. Prozac has been used by more

than 15 million people worldwide to treat depression, obsessive-compulsive disorders and bulimia.

HOSPITAL SERVICES UP, COSTS DOWN

Ontario will spend \$7.28 billion on its public hospitals during the 1995-96 fiscal year. In a news release, Health Minister Ruth Grier said her ministry's total spending will decline by just under 1%, while spending on community health, public health and long-term care will increase by 12%.

Improved services in the community mean patients are spending far less time in hospital, Grier said. With an average 1.2 million inpatients treated annually, the average length of hospital stays dropped 14% between 1989-90 and 1992-93; the number of day-surgery procedures rose from 791 000 to 896 000 during the same period. That dramatic shift is largely a result of efforts by hospital boards, managers, medical staff and employees to manage within available resources, she said.

FETAL NEURAL TISSUE RESEARCH ENCOURAGING

The first phase of controversial research using fetal neural tissue to stimulate dopamine production in patients with Parkinson's disease has ended with encouraging results in five volunteer patients aged 58 to 75 years. Speaking on the third an-

niversary of the first procedure, researchers at Halifax's Victoria General Hospital (VGH) said all five patients suffered no serious complications, experienced a lessening of the severity of their symptoms and saw a decrease in their rate of deterioration.

Researchers now plan to embark on phase two of the experimental procedure, under the direction of Dr. Ivar Mendez, newly appointed to the VGH's Division of Neurosurgery. Over the next 3 years more and younger patients will be involved, and they may undergo implantation at more than one site. Parkinson's disease affects more than 80 000 Canadians, more than half of whom are diagnosed before retirement age. The VGH's fetal neural transplantation program is the only one in the country.

US EXPERIMENTS WIN IGBEL PRIZES

The Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM), an organization representing 3000 doctors who promote alternatives to animal-based research, has presented its first annual "IgNobel Prize" for the worst animal experiment of 1994 to a New York University researcher whom it says addicted monkeys to crack cocaine. It says the experiments focused on the ways cocaine affects the cardiovascular system; however, PCRM says the researcher has published no papers on the subject in the 5 years since the experiment began, even though he has received \$500 000 a year in federal research funding. PCRM says the US Department of Agriculture and the National Institutes of Health began investigating the experiment after receiving reports of animal cruelty. The 1994 IgNobel Prize for Human Experiments was awarded for a study in

which children were given placebos instead of genuine whopping cough vaccine.

OTTAWA TO HOST HYPERTENSION CONFERENCE

The first World Conference on Hypertension Control will be held in Ottawa from June 21 to 24, bringing primary care physicians, cardiologists, community health workers and policymakers from around the world to discuss treatment and prevention. Organized by the World Hypertension League and the Canadian Coalition for High Blood Pressure Prevention and Control, the conference is cosponsored by Health Canada and the Canadian Hypertension Society. Details are available from the Conference Secretariat, PO Box 64064, Ottawa ON K1Y 4V1; 613 954-8651; (fax) 613 830-0411.

CARDIOLOGIST STANDS BY HIS CONVICTION

A New Jersey cardiologist who was fined \$66 for speeding on a near-deserted highway before dawn is standing by his conviction — not the court's — and maintains that he should not be penalized for rushing to hospital because of an emergency. Dr. Michael Kesselbrenner was clocked at 80 miles per hour (129 km-h) in a 55-mph zone en route to implant a pacemaker in an elderly patient whose heart rate had dropped following a heart attack. The state trooper delayed him only a few minutes, but issued a speeding ticket that led the judge to levy a fine and penalize the physician two demerit points.

Medical Economics says the doctor has spent about \$5000 fighting the

conviction over the last 2 years. His lawyer said judges and prosecutors usually dismiss the charge or downgrade the offence so it doesn't cost demerit points when it is established that there was a legitimate emergency; however, the municipal court, superior court and appellate court have not agreed, and Kesselbrenner is taking the case to the state Supreme Court. *Medical Economics* says that even though many of Kesselbrenner's colleagues tease him about spending thousands of dollars to fight the ticket, the expense has been offset by new patients attracted by the publicity.

GROUP ADDRESSES CAUSES OF POOR HEALTH, POVERTY

Twelve years after its founding, Canadian Physicians for Aid and Relief (CPAR) continues to support programs that address the underlying causes of chronic poverty and poor health in the Third World. CPAR projects focus on improving health care systems, regenerating degraded environments, ensuring the productive capacity of soil and providing adequate water supplies and the economic resources needed to achieve self-reliance.

Among its projects, CPAR trains community health workers, immunizes children, plants millions of trees, distributes cereal and vegetable seeds to farmers, provides emergency relief, develops communal water supplies and supports preventive community health initiatives such as latrine construction and health education. It raises funds by selling posters, gift cards and clothing and by seeking sponsors for tree-planting efforts. Information is available from CPAR, 202-111 Queen Street E., Toronto ON M5C 1S2; 416 369-0865; (fax) 416 369-0294; cpar@web.apc.org.